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Congress of the United States
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COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS (RANKING MEMBER)
FEDERAL LANDS
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SEA POWER AND PROJECTION FORCES
READINESS
FRANKING COMMISSION

The Honorable Ben Carson
Secretary, Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20410

Subject: Essex Village Apartments in Henrico County

Dear Secretary Carson:

Earlier this month, I visited Henrico County's Essex Village, a HUD Section 8 subsidized housing complex operated by P.K. Management. As the congressman for Virginia's 4th Congressional District, I represent all 1,600 of the community's residents – including a young mother who fell from her second floor balcony last week, and was injured, because her unit had been inadequately maintained.

The structural decay that caused that woman to fall was no isolated incident. As HUD is aware, Essex Village residents have been forced to endure systematically unsafe and unhealthy living conditions for too long. Earlier this week, for example, a sewer backup pushed raw sewage into a common area and a private apartment. More generally, the community faces widespread or recurrent issues with mold, vermin, sewage overflows, structural integrity, and basic maintenance or upkeep. County officials documented more than 140 code violations at the complex last year, and it failed HUD's most recent physical inspection – even after the operators' appeal.

Following my visit, members of the multi-family HUD team (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Richmond), county officials, and members of my staff held a conference call to discuss these and other problems. While that call gave me valuable insight into the Department's processes, and while I appreciate those HUD staffers' hard work and good intentions, no one shared a comprehensive plan to resolve outstanding issues.

If anything, the call raised new concerns – not just about Essex Village, but about the state of housing policy and how HUD operates. I am deeply concerned by taxpayer-dependent Section 8 operators' apparent ability to continue self-inspecting and self-regulating even in the face of widely-reported problems with their properties. I am also concerned by county inspectors' apparent inability to accompany HUD inspectors when they review individual units on such properties – again, even in a context of documented issues.

In response to last week's accident, I sent a letter requesting a second call with your staff in order to hear what HUD plans to do. I reiterate that request today: I would like to know why Essex Village was allowed to reach its current state of dangerous disrepair; what corrective actions HUD is taking or intends to take, and when; how HUD will work with other good-faith stakeholders – notably county officials – in order to achieve better

outcomes; and what recourse is realistically available to my constituents if fundamental problems are not swiftly and completely corrected.

In my previous letter, I also promised to share additional concerns, sparked by documented problems at the complex. Please find below a selection, by no means comprehensive, of those concerns – along with the as-yet-unanswered questions that they prompt me to ask.

1. Raw Sewage

The repeated backup of Essex Village's sanitary sewer, and the resultant overflows of raw sewage, pose obvious health and safety dangers to the entire community – as well as clear problems in terms of residents' quality of life. This complex should fully comply with federal, state, and local environmental standards.

Question: Why has HUD allowed this issue to recur and what actions will HUD take in the future to ensure sanitary conditions and compliance with the law?

2. Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) Contracts

Rated a troubled property, Essex Village received a failing score (51) in its January REAC physical inspection – even after P.K. Management's appeal. Despite whatever inspections or other actions HUD has taken over the intervening months, the complex is clearly still failing to provide decent, safe, and sanitary conditions.

Question: Do HAP contracts not subject property owners to requirements intended to prevent issues like those at Essex Village? Does HUD continue to issue or renew HAP contracts for a complex that fails to meet local, state, and federal health or safety standards? Are such contracts being issued or renewed at Essex Village – and if so, why?

3. Voucher Supply

Vouchers from the local housing authority are not as accessible as was suggested on our earlier call. According to the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, their "Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher waiting list is currently closed. It was last open for four days in April 2015." Given that waiting lists can stay closed for years, and given that many residents cannot afford to move elsewhere without assistance, it seems that many of my constituents in Essex Village lack a clear path out – no matter how badly conditions deteriorate.

Question: What options does HUD offer to occupants of unsafe or unsanitary Section 8 housing? Is there an expedited process by which residents can secure vouchers in order to escape hazardous conditions?

I recently called for the closure of Essex Village, in part because I am skeptical that urgently-needed changes can be made in a thorough and timely fashion. Whatever course HUD pursues, I urge you to remember that it is your mission to help each and every person now suffering in that community. Every resident should have access to safe and sanitary accommodations. My office stands ready to help you reach that goal.

I very much support HUD program policies and regulations that improve quality of life for all residents, and expect to see positive results through enforcement. I reiterate my earlier request for a follow-up call with HUD staff, and ask that they be prepared to answer the questions posed in this letter – including, first and foremost, how the Department will ensure that my constituents enjoy the decent living conditions that all Virginians and all Americans deserve.

As before, I ask that your staff contact my Chief of Staff, Abby Easter, at (804) 486-1840 or abbi.easter1@mail.house.gov to arrange that call.

Sincerely,

A. Donald McEachin

A. Donald McEachin
Member of Congress